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DOI, USDA, STATE PARTNERS TEST MORE THAN 13,000 WILD MIGRATORY BIRDS IN ALASKA

No Highly Pathogenic H5N1 Avian Influenza Detected

WASHINGTON, D.C. and BARROW, Alaska, August 29, 2006— Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns and Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne today announced that their departments and the State of Alaska have tested more than 13,000 wild migratory birds for highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1 in Alaska. No HPAI H5N1—a virus that has killed wild birds, commercial poultry and more than 140 people in Asia, Europe and Africa—has been detected in any of the Alaska samples.

“Guided by the national wild bird surveillance and early detection plan, our collaborative efforts have comprehensively sampled and tested high-priority species throughout Alaska,” said Secretary Kempthorne, who this week is visiting a sampling camp near Barrow, Alaska. “Although no high-path H5N1 virus has yet been detected, we must remain vigilant and thorough in this important detection and early warning program. I’d also like to recognize the cooperation of Alaska subsistence hunters, of citizens who have reported dead birds, and of the Alaska public in general, who have made great efforts to become informed on this issue and thus are valuable partners in state and federal efforts.”

“Close collaboration with our federal, state, and local partners is essential to the success of our national wild bird monitoring strategy,” said Secretary Johanns. “This plan is one of many tools we use to control the spread of highly pathogenic forms of the avian influenza virus. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also works on the international front, as well as at our borders and within them to ensure the highest levels of protection and early detection capabilities are in place.”

The national wild bird surveillance and early detection plan is part of President Bush’s *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza*. The President allocated \$29 million in his fiscal year 2006 avian influenza supplemental funding package for implementation of the wild bird monitoring plan.

The U.S. Department of Interior (DOI), USDA, the State of Alaska, and the University of Alaska have been involved with sampling wild birds in Alaska since April 2006. The sampling program includes a goal to sample and test 75,000 to 100,000 migratory birds across the United States this year.

So far DOI (including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey) has tested more than 11,000 samples and USDA has tested more than 2,000 samples—for a total of more than 13,000. Of those tested by DOI, approximately 113 have tested positive for some form of avian influenza. This is to be expected since there are 144 subtypes of "bird flu," most of which pose no threat to domestic poultry or humans and do not produce noticeable symptoms in wild birds. Of the 113 samples, testing showed none to be the highly pathogenic H5N1 virus. Several H5 combinations, including the *low pathogenic* form of H5N1—which poses no risk to poultry or people—are known to exist in North American wild bird populations.

The Alaska samples were taken from 26 "target species." Because of their migratory patterns and habitats, these species were determined to be most likely to have encountered highly pathogenic H5N1 before arriving in Alaska. Sample numbers (USDA data have not yet been added) are now being entered into a database called the HPAI Early Detection Data System (HEDDS), which is available at <http://wildlifedisease.nbii.gov/ai/> to agencies, organizations, and policymakers involved in avian influenza monitoring and response to share information on sample collection sites, bird species sampled, and test results.

Within the auspices of national wild bird surveillance and early detection plan, the USDA and DOI are working with Alaska, the other 49 states, as well as the U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States to collect 75,000 to 100,000 wild bird samples along with 50,000 environmental samples of wild bird droppings across the United States in 2006. USDA and DOI collaborated with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and the Pacific, Central, Mississippi, and Atlantic Flyway Councils to develop the plan, formally known as *An Early Detection System for H5N1 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in Wild Migratory Birds -- U.S. Interagency Strategic Plan.*

As birds from Alaska and Canada begin their southerly migration from these breeding grounds, state, federal and university biologists in the lower 48 states and Hawaii have begun capturing and sampling various species under an expanded wild bird surveillance program for all national migratory bird flyways and states. This intensified migratory bird surveillance is carried out through cooperative agreements and projects with the states and Pacific Islands.

The funding level for each state is based on species-specific wild bird migratory patterns, historic disease prevalence, habitat availability and other biological and physical criteria. USDA and the states have completed cooperative agreements, with USDA providing nearly \$4 million for state agencies to sample specific species of migratory birds at appropriate sites under plans coordinated through the four national flyway councils. DOI's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has finalized cooperative agreements with Hawaii, California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. Thus far, these states and other cooperators have received \$1.9 million from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to implement monitoring strategies in each state's surveillance plan.

Migratory birds are only one possible pathway for introducing HPAI H5N1 into North America. Other potential routes include international travel, and both legal and illegal commerce in poultry, poultry products, wildlife, and wildlife products. Federal and state governments have also bolstered efforts to monitor these other potential pathways for introducing the virus into North America.

For more information about USDA's and DOI's avian influenza efforts, go to www.usda.gov/birdflu and www.doi.gov/issues/avianflu. For information about the U.S. Government's efforts and guidance related to human pandemic preparedness, go to www.pandemicflu.gov.

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